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Adoption makes dreams come true

By DANA HARRIS / H-P Staff Writer

Susan Worley and her husband, Gary, prayed that they would conceive a child.

After several attempts, the Dowagiac couple was unsuccessful, but the two continued to pray, and one day, their pastor led them to their son, Matthew, 4.

"Our pastor said God answers prayers in one of four ways," she said. "He either says, 'Yes, you get what you want,' or he says, 'No,' or 'Not right now,' or the last one, 'Take something else.' The light bulb came on. I said, 'I haven't been listening.' Here this woman was at our church with a beautiful little boy staring in our face."

That woman at the church had been a foster mother to several children for more than 20 years, Worley said.

"She told me that this little boy's parents' parental rights had been terminated -- meaning they'll never get him back and that clears the way for somebody to come and adopt the child," Worley said. "She knew we couldn't have a baby, and she knew we were interested."

The Worleys finalized the adoption December 2001.

Before Matthew was adopted, he was one of the many children in Michigan's foster care system.

There are about 6,400 children in foster care in the state, according to Maureen Sorbet, spokeswoman for the state of Michigan Family Independence Agency.

"Approximately 4,600 have a goal of adoption. Most of those children are already with families who will probably adopt them -- either foster families or relatives," Sorbet said. "There are additionally 400 children who do not have an identified adoptive family. They're in foster care, but we have not identified a family that is willing to adopt them."

Michigan is working to solve this problem, but it is harder for some children to be adopted than others, Sorbet said. These children are usually minorities; older children; children with physical, emotional or mental impairments; or children with two or more siblings.

"Kids come into care because of abuse or neglect," said Tamela Phillips, adoption worker for Cass County. "We have a lot of kids that have challenges. Some have fetal alcohol syndrome, reactive attachment -- kids that have a hard time bonding with people."

"They think, 'The last person didn't want me.' We still want them to have good, loving families. Kids should be carefree. They shouldn't have to worry about where they're going to be tomorrow, and to know that people love them and that's where they're going to be for the rest of their lives."

Agencies have been trying to encourage people to provide homes for children.

"The most important thing is permanence," Phillips said. "We want a situation where kids can be kids."

"We have ... legislation to keep kids from languishing in foster care. The parents are given one year to correct the thing that brought them into foster care. Conditions need to be fixed within a year so the child does not grow up in foster care."

The type of help parents are required to receive is based on individual needs. Some

may need counseling, parenting classes, or substance abuse treatment and drug screening, Phillips said.

On Nov. 25, Michigan held its first Adoption Day, when counties throughout the state, including Cass County, celebrated adoptions.

"We wanted to bring special attention to families adopting children, and we also wanted to raise the public's awareness about the need for adoption in Michigan," Sorbet said.

About 250 children were adopted on Adoption Day, Sorbet said.

"We have 35 counties statewide that participated, and lots of other counties do their own special adoption, usually around Christmas time," Sorbet said. "We expect to do it again next year. We hope more counties participate."

Worley, whose son had been in foster care since he was 7 months old, also wishes more people would adopt.

"I would encourage anybody to adopt. There are thousands of kids out there. We have kids in our own county who need good homes," Worley said.

Worley is happy that she and her husband adopted their son.

"Matthew means gift from God," Worley said. "He's the biggest blessing I have in my life and I wouldn't change it for the world."

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